



Notes from LEAD Editor

*This month in **LEAD** you will find a number of articles that focus on various aspects of communication. For instance, the piece entitled "The Art of Communication" deals with communicating your vision, thoughts, and ideas, so you can be truly effective. You will also find useful articles providing tools for improving listening skills and offering constructive criticism. We encourage you to share the tools and ideas you find in **LEAD** with friends and colleagues.*

The ART of COMMUNICATION

The art of leadership encompasses many variables; however, there is one constant – communication. To be an effective leader, you must be able to communicate your vision, thoughts, and ideas in a manner that produces the greatest results. Never has the principle been more evident than in today's society of e-mail, voice mail, and the Internet, where information overload is the norm.

First, create a vision.

As a leader, it is important to communicate your vision or strategic plan. Where do you want the organization to be in the future? By telling the organization where you want it to be heading, you are empowering those people who work with you to make decisions and be dynamic.

Once you have set the goal, provide periodic feedback. There is nothing worse than trying to do a job while dealing with lack of direction and guidance that come from improper or untimely feedback.

Communication is a two-way street, so open the door and listen. Now that you have created your vision and are providing feedback, it's time to receive some input, so lend an ear to those talented individuals that fill the rooms and cubicles of the workplace.

When writing, practice "short but sweet" communication. When composing documents, state the facts and move on. There is no need to dilute your message with flowery verbiage and long-winded diatribes.

Remember, communication is a key part of leadership. Communication builds knowledge and knowledge is power – use it or lose it.

– Adapted from "Communication is Paramount," by Emerging Leader, www.emergingleader.com

Train Yourself in the ART of LISTENING

Once you learn how to listen to employees, your managerial skills will improve dramatically. You'll get better feedback, communicate better, and solve more problems. Here are some exercises that will improve your listening skills, and help you get the most out of each meeting with an employee.

Clean off your desk before meeting with employees. If there are loose papers on your desk, you'll unconsciously start to fiddle with them – and may even start to glance over them. Clear your desk for every conversation with an employee, so you can focus your attention on what they're saying.

Make eye contact. Train yourself to look at the person at the start of every conversation. When you make significant eye contact – this can then lead to a more productive conversation.

Train yourself to ask questions instead of making statements. *Example:* Don't say, "Joan, don't forget that the Anderson report needs to be in on Monday morning." Rather, say, "How is the Anderson report coming along, Joan?" "Any problems with making the deadline?" By asking questions you'll start a dialogue, and you never know what you might learn.

Learn to show interest during a conversation. Phrases such as "Yes, I see" and "I understand" do two things: 1) They show that you're listening, and encourage the other person to keep talking; and 2) They keep your attention focused.

Don't blurt out questions as soon as the employee is finished speaking. It looks as if you were formulating your reply rather than listening. Before you ask a question, paraphrase the employee's words. *Example:* "So what you're saying is..." Then ask your question: "Well, let me ask you this..." This cuts down on miscommunication.

Don't smile the whole time. A lot of managers do this because they think it sends a friendly message. It can, but people also often mistake it for mental absence, or a sign that you're not taking them seriously. Save smiles for humorous remarks.

– Adapted from Positive Leadership, (800) 878-5331, www.ragan.com





PROVIDING CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

"This is great, but I'd like you to meet all your deadlines."

Constructive criticism. There is one item that is causing this criticism to be ineffective: the word "but." You thought you were offering good constructive criticism, but that one word can totally negate the praise. The praise seems a contrived lead-in.

Instead, I suggest that you change the word "but" to "and." You can say, "Great, you met today's deadline, and now if you meet tomorrow's deadline, we'll get this project out..." That's the subtle change with big impact. You will be telling staff without criticizing them at all.

In addition, if employees or co-workers need to improve, you can't begin without calling attention to the concern. Instead of outright criticism, you'll get a better response if you:

1. **Begin with praise and honest appreciation. Tell the person honestly what he or she did right, and that you appreciate the contribution.**
2. **Call attention to people's mistakes indirectly.**
3. **Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person. Many of us don't make mistakes today simply because we've made them in the past and learned from them. Why, then, should we get mad at an employee who makes the same mistake?**

These three tactics are just a few of the ways you can motivate people. Put the ideas and strategies to work, and you may change people's views of you and their world.

-Adapted from "Giving constructive criticism effectively," by Michael Crom, USA Today, March 2001

3 KEYS TO BETTER COMMUNICATION

Communication is the key to a good working relationship between leaders and staff, but too many leaders pay lip service to the idea and ignore the practice. Try these surefire tips for better communication.

Don't wait for employees to come to you. An open-door policy may be a good start, but what if nobody comes to your door? Each day, get out from behind your desk and walk around. Talk to people. Listen to what they tell you. Do this often enough and soon employees will start sharing their honest ideas and opinions with you.

Be sure staff is communicating, too. Don't assume that just because you're communicating, the rest of the staff is as well. During staff meetings, for example, ask managers to gather feedback from co-workers on upcoming decisions and changes. Keep track of the managers who actually do this, and those who ignore it. Also, create a communication strategy that involves the managers in communicating face-to-face with employees.

Gather feedback on the front lines. Spend one day a month working outside your office, doing the job of a frontline employee. Ask lots of questions about what works, what doesn't, and how the job could be improved. You'll learn lots, and you'll also improve both morale and customer relations.

- Adapted from Positive Leadership, (800) 878-5331, www.ragan.com

10 GUIDELINES TO GOOD COMMUNICATION

1. **I will be sure I understand what I want to say.**
 - What is the real purpose of my message?
 - What do I expect the receiver to do?
2. **I will clarify my ideas before I attempt to communicate them.**
 - Can I accurately say what I want to say?
 - How many ideas should I include?
3. **I will state my message as simply as possible.**
 - Is technical language imperative or would simpler language be better?
 - Will the words I use mean the same to the receiver as they do to me?
4. **I will consider the entire environment affecting my communication.**
 - What impression does my form of the message convey?
 - When and where will the message be received?
 - How will the time and location affect the interpretation?
5. **I will be aware of the receiver.**
 - Can I capitalize upon his/her known needs or interests to improve understanding?
 - Can I get the message from his/her viewpoint and understand it?
 - Am I telling the receiver all he/she needs to know?
6. **I will consider the overtones of my message as well as the intended message.**
 - Does the tone of the message say more than the basic content?
 - Can various interpretations of meaning cause my message to be misunderstood?
7. **I will provide for and encourage feedback.**
 - Can the receiver easily tell me what was understood?
 - Can he/she ask for more information?
8. **I will follow-up my communication.**
 - When I finished my message, was I complete?
9. **I will be sure my actions support my communication.**
 - Do I do as I say?
 - Does my body language support my message?
10. **I will seek not only to be understood, but also to understand. I will be a good listener.**
 - Do I concentrate when I listen?
 - Do I understand what the other person is really saying?
 - Am I listening or just hearing?

- Adapted from research conducted by University of Omaha at Nebraska, www.unomaha.edu

